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AUTHOR Cidis, Esther Foxworth
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ABSTRACT

The author describes her experiences while teaching gifted elementary students Relevance was stressed in the program which utilized a wide variety of materials from audiovisuals to pamphlets from government and private agencies. Problem solving encouraged divergent thinking, and units of study were covered in a project format with research often an integral part of the unit. Half of each day was spent using conventional curriculum to ensure adequate grounding in basic skills. The classroom was operated as an economic system with payment for assigned tasks. Each child was subject to income tax, social security tax, and union membership dues. Students were able to spend their wages bimonthly, at which time, such items as fruit or candy were available to those with enough money. The system allowed for individual advancement based on industry and incentive and provided participants with a relevant educational experience. (PHR)

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A GIFTED PROGRAM IN A TRADITIONAL SETTING

Esther Foxworth Cidis

Giftedness is not so very rare on Long Island's north shore, at least it wasn't during those very special years in the early seventies when I explored the challenge of teaching Commack's gifted students. Nobody labeled them as "gifted" children, of course; in the democratic seventies all kinds of ability groupings were avoided, but these youngsters stood out as generally superior to the average. Aside from the crude measure of group I.Q. tests that indicated for most of those years, a clear majority of youngsters at or above 120, the students themselves simply behaved in ways atypical of your average population of elementary school children. Exuberant, turned on, raising a million questions, "into" problem solving -- a remarkable group of youngsters with a surprisingly mature capacity for productive as well as evaluative thinking. I look back on those halcyon days as on a kind of Camelot experience. It was a special time of challenge of enormous growth, of significant achievement.

When I first found myself "beleaguered", or "blessed" (initially I wasn't sure which) with a superior class of students, I knew I had some tough thinking to do. The central issue seemed to be to select a basic vehicle that could convey instruction in the basics (computation, decoding, encoding, proper written expression etc.) while exciting substantial long term involvement and enthusiasm because of its innate capacity to grow and flow with their expanding interests and with the current issues of our times.

The world of the "grown-up" can be adapted to become that perfect conveyance that will hold their interest, yet by definition is pertinent to their personal and professional futures. From earliest childhood the impulse to imitate adult work patterns is readily apparent--it forms the basis for the transmission of any culture. From Barbie Dolls to Monopoly, a multitude of children's games and toys reflect a youngster's absorption with adult roles. More significantly, any instruction in such areas as consumer education, environmental

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studies, banking and personal finances, urban problems, career exploration, basic economics, the energy crisis, and taxation is by definition relevant to their understanding of the present and to the future roles they will play in their culture.

The key word is "relevance". Now he sees an immediate application for those same skills he previously viewed as having only limited value. You can't very well balance a checkbook, file an income tax return, study various career alternatives, and make war on urban blight, etc., if you haven't an increasingly sophisticated grasp of the "three R's". Then too I needed a focus that would allow for substantial differences both between and within individuals. No two gifted children, let alone a class full, will excel to the same degree and in the same areas anymore than two average youngsters will. Perhaps skiiing can serve as an apt analogy. Assume all of an instructor's beginning students are exposed to the same basic introductory lessons that will allow for safe and effective down hill progression. Our flock of young skiers will begin to try to exercise what's been taught. Some may never make substantial progress beyond this point, some get the general idea and gradually are ready for the next stage of instruction, while others catch on rapidly and are eager to plunge ahead into learning more sophisticated maneuvers. Although all three groups started together with the same set of introductory lessons, same teacher, same time frame, results were markedly different. Nothing surprising in this--it is typical of any group learning situation, but the result is an entirely positive one. All of the students were exposed to the rudiments of skiing and all mastered the essential fundamentals allowing those with greater ability and a higher degree of interest to elect more advanced instruction, while permitting the least adept to proceed at a far less accelerated pace.

Enough of this "down hill" analogy. The point is that I decided on an overall"elastic" focus that I felt allowed for a substantial

range of interests and abilities. The elasticity had to be a basic ingredient in the way each new area was introduced so as to allow for the inevitable range of individual differences.

Each "adult" unit was begun with a systematic introduction to decoding vocabulary peculiar to that specific area of concentration. I was a stickler for precise and accurate usage as an essential key to the precise and accurate understanding of the subject area. Some 40 to 50 words from the most concrete and least abstract all the way up through the most sophisticated and complex were decoded, defined, used, and explored. As with the skiing analogy, students were responsible for mastery of the meaning and the spelling of as many words as was possible for them individually. The bulk of the others they tended to pick up by the process of osmosis.

Once armed with a basic "glossary", my introductory lectures, some remarkably fine audio-visual materials (borrowed from secondary schools, public libraries, and other public and private organizations), and World Books articles on the topics shared aloud as a listening comprehension skill, all of them were able to get a handle on the fundamentals of the subject. In addition I begged or borrowed multiple copies of basic explanatory pamphlet materials, usually available in bulk form, from an incredible variety of government and private agencies. An odd kind of reader you may say, but we tackled them from a linguistic standpoint. We'd begin by paraphrasing and conclude by summarizing the content, looking for clues to its organization so that we could outline the essentials, and lastly evaluating the material to distinguish fact from opinion and to determine author bias.

Problem solving exercises were another way of developing increasingly effective convergent and finally divergent thinking. Once a topic had been introduced I encouraged the formation of small brain storming groups to attempt to formulate into words first what they

wanted to know about the topic and then to explore themselves the best ways to go about researching the answers. On occasion groups would design their own bulletin boards entitled "What We Want to Know" which were superceded eventually by their logical off-shoots entitled "What We Found Out". It was my province to suggest to them refinements of their "resource" list based on the constraints of cost and over-all feasibility, but thereafter we worked together to locate and contact public officials, professionals, or otherwise knowledgeable sources willing to speak to our concerns. Very seldom did I allot a speaker more than a 15 to 20 minute interval to articulate his central thesis in order to avoid the pitfall of a speaker who pitched his approach well below or in some cases above my atypical student population. Instead I encouraged my students to formulate and write out thoughtful and provokative questions prior to the arrival of our quest to be sure he or she spoke directly to their concerns.

As a part of the English curriculum stress was put on designing an efficient business style letter of inquiry to solicit additional information germaine to the topic under current study. In some cases students further utilized their writing skills by designing, typing up, "running off", and personally administering to homeowners copies of precisely worded surveys or questionnaires designed to educate as well as to elicit information. They tallied and then tabulated the results in such a wide variety of different ways that the statistical work up involved a multitude of different and useful mathematical operations. This prompted the introduction of some new skills as well as the reinforcement of many others -- a "natural" way to motivate learning and using mathematics.

Midway into a new unit each student was encouraged or required, depending on ability and inclination, to submit a detailed and accurately constructed outline of a research proposal. These were designed to secure "government" contracts (funding and time) to facilitate exploration in depth of some aspect of particular interest related to the unit under study. The topic's work-up would utilize

the investigative and problem solving approaches stressed in the curriculum areas of social studies and science. The age old problem of our need for new sources of energy was a topic chosen by a number of budding scientist. Ingeneous examples of wind, solar, geothermal, atomic, and even bicycle powered generators wers designed, displayed, and evaluated. Every year at least four or five of the parents used to get so involved, they would ask to come in to view our energy fair. Needless to add there was substantial and productive "spin-off" from each of these regularly scheduled oral as well as written "project" presentations.

Similarly in the civics/social studies area, for example, our study of economics and municipal finances sparked a project, designed and executed by two students working together, to invite representatives from management (the school board's appointed manager of the district's finances) and from labor (the head of the teacher's union) to meet with us separately to detail and defend their respective moral and fiscal positions. We spent days cross checking their financial positions or records, and analyzing how the two sides could legitimately view the matter from such totally different perspectives. While much of our analysis utilize increasingly sophisticated mathematical skills, the main thrust of this project was to examine the historic polarization between labor and management.

At first glance one would not suspect taxation, women's rights, career ed., and consumer economics to be the stuff of a highly amusing and constructive language arts program, but such was the case. To the delight of young and old audiences visited by our "strolling" troop of mini players, they turned these unlikely topics into finely crafted hilarious one act poetic productions.

All this was in addition to the fifty percent of our day that was devoted directly to the conventional curriculum. Not even the "fundamentals" of down hill skiing can be absorbed if one has not training in muscular coordination and the refinement of balance prerequisite

to participation in basic ski instruction. No responsible program for the gifted can ignore the need for a thorough grounding in those subjects that have traditionally been the hallmark of our educational system. It is essential that, however innovative and stimulating your "adult" approach, you never lose sight of the need to provide daily and intensive instruction in what we euphemistically refer to as the "three R's". They are "the way" to knowledge without which no program of enrichment is a valid addition.

Given this admixture of the traditional and the innovative in curriculum as well as a structured academic approach used in the presentation of both, my student's exposure to "intellectual" knowledge was extensive. It is sometimes assumed that in the light of the gifted student's enormous academic potential that a strictly cognative approach is what's indicated. On the contrary, frequently it's the affective areas of his or her development that deserve your closer attention, because it is these aspects that may not have been able to keep pace with his surging intellectual gains. While less common than most people think, there is an element of truth to the familiar parody of the genius who cannot sufficiently navigate his peer-colleague relations to have his ideas taken seriously. The child who experiences himself and is perceived of by others as markedly different even if an adult value system conceives of that difference as a plus, has a problem. He may not be able to relate to his contemporaries' thought processes, and this in turn may tend to put him out of touch with their feelings - an isolation that can hinder his ability to form meaningful needed attachments among his peers. He may be buffeted as well by excessive parental demands - "a gifted boy like yourself should be able to knock that off in no time!" An IQ score is a mean of a variety of verbal and performance subscores. It does not tell you that at all times and in all areas this youngster will perform in a superior fashion, although many parents and teachers alike tend to assume that to be so.

A Gifted Program in a Traditional Setting

Meaningful training in the affective aspects of learning is best achieved through some kind of "hands-on" educational experience where personal interaction is stressed. Let me illustrate what I mean with just one area of "adult life" that was lived or experienced on a daily basis in my classroom.

My classroom operated as a full blown economy; all tasks were assigned adult occupational titles, they were salaried at various levels using simulated bills, and additional tasks were paid for on a commission basis. My youngsters' income was subject to a graduated income tax, social security taxes were withheld, and a property tax was levied based on the condition and location of the homes (desks) they had purchased. In addition money was withheld from weekly paychecks to cover union dues. Naturally they had their own labor union complete with shop stewards and negotiating team who ran a most successful legitimate lunch time pretzel vending operation under the management of the class officers and myself.

In addition it was necessary to increase taxes periodically as the needs of those on public assistance became more pressing - those who were home ill and therefore suffered a loss of income as well as those whose "tutorial" (extra help) bills were beyond their means. Then too there was the problem of fines for the wage earner to contend with. Following on our unit on criminal justice it was decided that the court could and should levy substantial fines for such felonious offenses as: assult and battery (fighting), fraud (any form of dishonesty), larceny (petty thievery), and lesser fines for such common misdemeanors as slander (name calling), parking offenses (chair improperly positioned), disturbing the peace (calling out), and attempted regicide (harrassing the teacher).

Despite the pressure of these extraordinary legal, plus regular fixed obligations, in a substantial number of cases sizable sums were accured, often through voluntarily working over-time (recreation and after school hours) in a tutorial capacity with a fellow citizen less

adept in some particular academic area. In addition, one could supplement one's income by bidding on a governmant contract to do research or experimental work in an area vital to the survival of the greater community.

Our controlled economy provided a consumer event (shopping spree) for the wage earners on a bi-monthly basis; thus one's net could be invested in such luxury items as fruit or a small candy bar. The problem was that given "teacher contrived" severe shortages of these desirable consumer products, inflation tended to run rampent. Nine months of run away inflation reduced my less fortunate to hungry, my more affluent to a reduced standard of living. Milky Ways that started at $3.00 in September were going for as much as $50.00 to $75.00 by mid December. This in turn prompted a fresh round of research papers and oral reports, while flooding the market with tutors which in turn depressed the level of wages they could command.

The upshot was that we simply had to find a way of increasing the availability of consumer products, thus lowering prices, or risk a severe recession. The government (teacher and elected class officials) provided a loan of 200 pennies per applicant and issued 12% per annum bonds payable monthly to provide small businesses venture capital for a bi-monthly noon hour farmer's market enterprise to raise the sums needed to "stock" the company store. The effect was electrifying; newly wealthy entrepreneurs quickly donated the needed sums whilst gaining first hand experience as owners and operators of their own firms. Naturally, of course, these captains and captainesses of industry never neglected to collect the 7% sales tax charged by the "State of Our Classroom" and duely submitted it to the governor and state officials.

This was but one example of a "living" education; there were others and most overlapped, but the effect was that the classroom became a laboratory for an affective education while operating as a microcosm of the state. You will note as well that every aspect of this program

involved extensive and sometimes intensive interpersonal relations. The students were making meaningful value judgments based on the needs of the group, evaluating alternative approaches to common problems, and collectively implementing solutions in areas where one or more segments of the society were experiencing unmet needs. In this way the affective aspects of learning were emphasized.

One of the most telling advantages of this scheme is that one can start "small" and at one's own pace and inclination add on and on to it as your ideas and theirs, fuel fresh approaches. No two programs will look exactly alike. Certainly mine grew and evolved over the years. Not genius on the part of the teacher, but merely an open mind is the key to implementing a challenging and effective education for the superior child.

My students worked terribly hard - we all did! Those long hours fueled by the excitement of an ideal stimulus systematically applied yielded heady results. This approach to teaching the gifted and talented child made teaching a joy and learning the adventure it was intended to be.

Esther Foxworth Cidis
9 Blue Grass Court
Huntington, New York